



# VAnanguard

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

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**Women Veterans Care**

**Wounded Warrior Regiment**

**Horses for Heroes**

**Living Well With SCI**



A woman with dark hair, wearing a military uniform, is shown in profile, hugging a young child with blonde hair. The child is wearing a dark green and blue plaid jacket. The background is dark with some out-of-focus lights.

*Women represent the fastest-growing subpopulation of the U.S. military, and are enrolling in the VA health care system at record levels.*

# She Served, She Deserves ...

The Women Veterans Health Program is making dramatic progress in enhancing women's health care at VA facilities.

Women constitute nearly 15 percent of today's active duty troops and represent the fastest-growing subpopulation of the U.S. military. Correspondingly, women are enrolling in the VA health care system at record levels. Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom have added 100,000 women veterans to the rolls. Based on Department of Defense active duty rosters, the number of women veterans will continue to climb.

Understandably, most VA health care facilities were built with men in mind. For decades, the system was accustomed to serving mostly men—as recently as 1998, women represented only 4.4 percent of all veterans (see sidebar, “She Served So That We Could Live Free”). Now the landscape is changing and more women veterans, young and old, are turning to VA for health care.

The Women Veterans Health Strategic Health Care Group has set a goal of ensuring that all women veterans receive timely, equitable, high-quality health care services at VA facilities. This significant effort involves everything from the abstract—changing the perception that VA health facilities serve only men—to the concrete—making certain that facilities have the necessary women's health equipment and can offer women adequate privacy.

Specifically, the Women Veterans Health mission is to make certain that all eligible women veterans requesting VA care are assured of:

- comprehensive primary care by a proficient and interested primary care provider;
- privacy, security, dignity and sensitivity to gender-specific needs;
- the right care in the right place and time;
- state-of-the-art health care equipment and technology; and
- highest quality preventive and clinical care, equal to the high levels of care provided to male veterans.

Despite the enormity of the task, Women Veterans Health has made

progress on many fronts. In 2008, facilities received \$32.5 million in supplemental funding for investments in women's health equipment, training and supplies. That same year, a VA work group released recommendations for delivering comprehensive primary care to women, and Women Veterans Health began working with Veterans Integrated Service Networks across the country to identify how they would improve care for women.

A significant boost for the program was the 2008 requirement that every VA facility have a women veterans program manager dedicated full time to overseeing women's health. These providers had often previously had multiple other duties. Now they are a critical link in the Women Veterans Health program, advocating for women veterans at the facility level and implementing key strategies in support of the Women Veterans Health mission (see sidebar, “Reaching Out to Women Veterans”).

Ultimately, the Women Veterans Health program aims to elevate the Veterans Health Administration to a position of national leadership in the provision of health care for women and, through that success, raise the standard of care for all women. Much work remains to be done.

Performance metrics show gaps between the quality of care that women and men receive at VA. Some

women veterans are forced to travel long distances to reach a VA facility that offers appropriate care. And misconceptions about—and by—women veterans still exist.

Many women veterans believe that they must have served overseas or in a war zone before they can be called “veterans,” regardless of the number of years served. These women are less likely to identify with VA or come to a VA facility for health care, even when they lack other health care options.

The Women Veterans Health program branding and outreach efforts focus on changing this. The tagline of the Women Veterans Health brand, “She served, she deserves ...,” is included on all program materials distributed inside and outside VA facilities throughout the nation. Women veterans program managers at each facility are collaborating with veterans groups and programs in their communities to educate women veterans about VA services available to them.

“The significance of branding the program can't be overlooked,” said Women Veterans Health Chief Consultant Patty Hayes. “It is important that when a woman walks into a VA facility, she sees images of women veterans like herself. And the program should represent a consistent set of services and level of quality that she can expect at any VA facility across

### She Served So That We Could Live Free

Women were officially recognized as members of the armed forces in 1901 with the inception of the Army Nurse Corps, but their participation in U.S. military action dates back to the Revolutionary War. During that conflict and the Civil War, women tended wounds, spied on enemies, and in some cases disguised themselves as men.

Throughout the 20th century, the number of women in the military grew steadily. World War I produced 25,000 women veterans and World War II, 319,000. The oldest living Army veteran up until she died at the age of 110 in late 2009, Gertrude Noone, served as a tech sergeant during World War II.

Few military roles are barred to women today, and these are changing as well—next year women will serve on submarines. As a result, the percentage of women on active duty has grown to significant levels: the number of living women veterans stands at 1.8 million and is climbing rapidly.



## Reaching Out to Women Veterans

A subset of women veterans program managers nationwide gathers monthly to focus on communications and outreach to women veterans. As part of their efforts, the group designs and distributes materials targeted at educating women on preventive health topics. The eye-catching posters, wallet cards and table tents—distributed monthly to all women veterans program managers—help raise awareness of critical issues for women veterans, such as heart disease, osteoporosis, smoking cessation, mental health and many others.

These health campaigns include steps that women veterans can take to prevent disease and illness, and urge them to contact VA for help. Women veterans program managers, public affairs officers and providers are posting the materials throughout facilities, distributing them at programs designed for women veterans, and taking them to demobilization sites and community job fairs.

"These pieces give women veterans a place in VA," said Dr. Desmarie DeCuir, lead women veterans program manager, VISN 4. "Many women still think VA is just about male veterans. When they see the Women Veterans Health identity over and over again, it lets them know that VA is focused on women veterans' health issues too."

The group is also encouraging women veterans program managers to schedule activities connected to the monthly campaigns in the community. The goal is to reach women veterans who don't regularly visit VA for health services and encourage them to come in.

In March, the women veterans program managers are focusing on homelessness and connecting with service organizations in the community to reach homeless women veterans.

"Whether they served last year or 25 years ago, VA has something to offer them and we want to make sure they know that," said DeCuir.

the nation."


The Women Veterans Health program is also tackling misconceptions that are internal to VA.

"The confusion about what role women play in war today extends beyond the general public. Even VA employees are still sometimes unclear about the nature of modern warfare, which presents challenges for women seeking care," said Kayla Williams, an Army veteran, addressing the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee in July 2009. "For example, being in combat is linked to post-traumatic stress disorder, but since women are supposedly barred from combat, they may face challenges proving that their PTSD is service-connected. It is vital that all VA employees, particularly health care providers, fully understand that women do see combat."

For the first time in years, VA Central Office is providing the field

with expertise in areas integral to women's health care, including comprehensive health care, education and reproductive health. Nearly 400 providers across VA have completed "mini-residencies" in women's health, and five mini-residencies are scheduled for this year.

VA is committed to providing the highest quality care to every woman veteran, whether she served her country six months ago or six decades ago, said Hayes.

For more information about the Women Veterans Health initiative, visit [www.publichealth.va.gov/women-shealth](http://www.publichealth.va.gov/women-shealth). 

By Connie Raab

*Right: Eye-catching posters distributed monthly by a group of women veterans program managers help raise awareness of preventive health issues for women veterans.*

